

Can Stories Save Our Oceans? Talking With Animal Planet's *Mermaids* Creator

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Do you think the discovery -- or even the hope of mermaids -- might help save our oceans?

Mermaids may be a personification of people's desire to believe that there are yet spectacular things that inhabit the oceans -- and maybe a belief in the possibility of mermaids and other marvels helps people want to preserve the oceans, to ensure there that such discoveries can yet be made.

Why did you choose military sonar as the antagonist for your *Mermaids* sagas?

We wanted to invite viewers to suspend their disbelief and consider how a legendary creature could have an evolutionary basis. We girded the story with real evolutionary examples and real-world events. In following how mermaids would have evolved, we speculated about environmental threats. One of the greatest contemporary threats they would face would be Navy sonar testing. The facts inform the fiction and make the story credible because there's truth in it: the Navy really is conducting sonar testing that's killing whales and other marine mammals. And it really did deny its role in causing mass whale deaths due to sonar testing. The story of mermaids becomes more credible because something incredible--our government misleading us about sonar testing -- is true. We built the story on something that is, in fact, real.

In *Mermaids: The New Evidence*, you point out that Greenland has called for a [moratorium](#) on gas and oil drilling; perhaps after the riveting underwater footage of a

possible mermaid by the Danish geologist's submersible crew. Do you think it will take conclusive evidence of an aquatic hominid to convince the military that they must limit sonar testing?

The Navy's own [estimate](#) for how many marine mammals will be impacted by its [sonar testing](#) throughout the next five years is 33 million animals. And because it's the Navy's own estimate, that's a conservative number of animals that may be deafened or killed outright by its sonar testing. It's an appalling figure.

I think as people begin to understand how destructive the Navy sonar testing is and how terrifying an impact it will have upon marine life of all kinds, then there will be greater [public pressure](#) brought to bear on them to bring it to an end. Or at least modify the Navy's testing plans to include more safeguards and considerations of animal welfare and critical habitats. Stories or popular science fiction that depict what the Navy's sonar testing is doing to the environment -- including to species as yet unknown -- may help expose the Navy's actions to a broader audience. The Navy's sonar is in fact a [real threat](#) to the future possibility of all marine life.

Do you think your *Mermaids* sagas have raised public awareness to the point of taking action?

Science fiction has a proud history of imagining the consequences of technology used irresponsibly and making those issues have mass appeal by incorporating them into popular stories. Those technologies often belong to an imagined future, but in the case of the Navy's sonar testing, it's killing whales now and has been killing them for years. If we rightly believe that we are losing whales and other unknown species to the Navy's sonar testing, and the *Mermaids* films have helped introduce audiences to this and invite them to care about it, then I would be very proud.

As a storyteller, what is it about mermaids that most engages your imagination?

Mermaids are one of the most enduring legends in human culture. They are perhaps our most pervasive myth -- nearly all sea-faring cultures have stories about mermaids, and they're depicted with remarkable similarity, even across cultures that never had contact with one another. And there still are sightings and reports of mermaids to this day.

This enduring myth makes me wonder if there could be an evolutionary explanation for mermaids. If mermaids are real, then where did they come from? How did they evolve? Would they really breathe under water, or would they be air-breathing marine mammals? Do they look like humans because they are human -- a distant branch of our own human family tree? I'd never seen an account of mermaids that offered a biologically credible history of their origins or imagined them as hominid marine-mammals. Could there be an evolutionary basis for a legendary creature? That was the question that was the springboard into this story.

We share an interest in The [Aquatic Ape Theory](#) and certainly you explore that evolutionary explanation. Why do you think more scientists are considering this Aquatic Ape theory as credible?

The Aquatic Ape Hypothesis remains very controversial but aspects of it do have supporters. For example, the wading origins theory, which accounts for how humans developed a bipedal gait and began walking upright, which the Aquatic Ape Hypothesis posits comes from a time when early humans went wading in coastal shallows, looking for food. Some prominent paleoanthropologists have questioned whether this could account for human bipedalism. There may be an evolutionary analogue in the fossil record that supports this: the only other non-human primate that ever developed a bipedal gait lived in a watery, swamp-like environment, *Oreopithecus*, commonly referred to as the swamp ape.

Maybe the Aquatic Ape Hypothesis is a persistent theory because there are some aspects of it that are still debated to this day. Of course, the *Mermaids* films aren't being submitted for peer review; they're submitted to an audience with the hope that they appeal to a sense of possibility and wonder. But I think that because the films draw upon real scientific examples and evolutionary theory, and we cite real animal examples of creatures that have made the transition from land to sea, the story becomes more credible, and I hope, more compelling. Science is the springboard into imagination in *Mermaids*, and it's science fiction in the truest sense because the science informs the fiction.

Mermaids are the new vampires in pop culture. More *Mermaids* in the future?

I suspect you feel similarly, given your own very successful series of [mermaid](#) novels, that the draw of wanting to imagine and sketch greater details about the mermaids' world and from where they come and their relationship to humans is a strong pull for storytellers and audiences alike. It has been for as long as we've told stories. So we'll see where these stories themselves continue to evolve.

Some in the [media](#) have ridiculed this search for mermaids and the "fiction based on fact" style of your storytelling. What do you say to them?

A marine biologist take it to task for not focusing on real problems in the ocean, which I think was an odd criticism insofar as Navy sonar testing is a very real problem, and it's at the center of the first story. Oil exploration and its adverse impact on the environment is a focus of the second film and its story.

I've seen criticisms that the films are subversive and dangerous to science teaching. If they are subversive, then I think they're maybe even more subversive than some of the critics have allowed. Both films ask the viewer to believe in evolution, if they're to believe in mermaids. And both films cite real evolutionary examples and principles in tracing the land-to-sea transitions of some marine mammal lineages, which we use to chart the mermaids' evolution in our story. So in a country where many states are still hostile to the teaching of evolution, I think we at least deserve to be indicted for the full extent of our crimes: We just made a work of popular fiction

predicated on evolution, invoking real evolutionary examples and evolutionary theory, which was watched by millions of people in places resistant to the teaching of evolution.

Getting people to care about environmental issues and introducing them to science and scientific concepts through popular entertainment on a popular entertainment network should be a good thing.

I've heard that Jaques Cousteau talked often about mermaids. And I've had scientists tell me, again off the record, that they've observed astonishing and mysterious creatures in the deep sea. Do you believe in mermaids?

Cultures all over the world have legends of little people -- pixies, sprites, brownies, fairies, Hobbits. A few years ago, scientists in Indonesia discovered a new species of human that lived only 12,000 years ago, which would have been contemporary with modern humans and which stood only three feet tall: *Homo floresiensis*, famously dubbed "Hobbits" by the team that discovered them. Fully adult human beings that were three feet tall and weighed not much more than 30 pounds. Many scientists rejected these findings at first because they just seemed too impossible to be believed, but the prevailing consensus now is that these were, indeed, a miniature species of humans. So all of a sudden, all these legends of little people, including legends from Indonesia, the very place where the Hobbits lived, take on a very different cast.

These legends seem to be less fanciful, perhaps, and more like cultural echoes from a time when people may have actually seen them and even lived alongside them. Some of these legends, as it turns out, were in fact very real.